



Mark Bauerlein: Graff at the MLA

A few minutes into Gerald Graff's presidential address at last year's Modern Language Convention (go [here](#) and scroll down to "Listen to the 2008 Presidential Address"), he recalls a conversation early in his teaching career.

"I had assigned an essay that asked my students to discuss the meanings of a certain novel. A young man came up after class and reported that the professor in one of his other courses had said it was a serious error to attribute meanings to a literary work, a practice that confused moral messages with propaganda. His professor had invoked the New Critical mantra that 'A poem should not mean / But be' as well as its pop culture equivalent, the movie mogul Sam Goldwyn's statement that 'If it's a message you want, call Western Union.' I conceded that there were problems with the message-hunting approach to literature, as the New Critics called it, but I argued that there was a difference between looking for 'meanings' in a work, which might be complex and subtle, and 'a message,' which implied something simplistic."

The episode, Graff says, illustrates an unfortunate condition in humanities education that has only gotten worse over time. He calls it "Courseocentrism," a situation in which the curriculum breaks up into discrete classes that look more like a collection of disparate experiences than a cumulative sequence of study aimed at the formation of knowledgeable and skillful graduates. It follows from the libertarian outlook of the teachers, who think, "I do my thing in my classes — what others do is, well, what others do."

Graff focuses on the end point, that is, how it comes off to students. They get "curricular mixed messages," he says, "clashing stories . . . from the faculty." In the episode above, the student received from Graff and the other teacher contrary assignments, and he was confused. One teacher seemed to "undercut" the other, forcing the student into what may have seemed senseless adjustments from morning to afternoon ("relativists at 10 o'clock and universalists after lunch").

All too many literature students undergo the same fragmentation in silence, wondering what their progress from semester to semester is supposed to produce. Teachers don't have to reconcile those differences, but students do, for it isn't easy to write a paper that asks for one kind of interpretative posture on Thursday and another that asks for another, conflicting kind of posture Friday.

The sharpest students may have picked up the variety of approaches and disparities of readings and synthesized them, recognizing their teachers' "conflicting or

incommensurable views” as an intellectual condition that should be central to their learning. They recognized beneath the schools of thought and conflict of faculties a set of “common practices of reading, analysis, and argument,” those critical thinking skills that cut across different courses and semesters.

But those “high achievers” are a tiny minority. Such discontinuities strike “the struggling student majority” as a difficult and even bogus exercise. Some of them simply aren’t ready for the intellectual challenge, some haven’t the background of reading to proceed to more advanced interpretative questions, and some crave a more coherent moral vision from humanistic study.

Graff isolates two “disastrous consequences.” One, the curriculum loses its cumulative aspect, forcing students “in effect to start over from scratch in every new course.” And two, students end up exaggerating the differences between faculty members and overlooking the similarities, playing up the methodological/theoretical/political antagonisms and missing out on the “common practices of argument and analysis that lay beneath.”

In the second outcome, Graff maintains, sits one of the most damaging conditions of higher education, for in not recognizing the underlying practices, students don’t recognize and assimilate the basic character of academic life. “In other words,” Graff concludes, “the disconnect between courses ultimately reproduced itself in a disconnect between most students and academic culture itself.”

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Graff at the MLA, Part 2

Gerald Graff’s presidential address at last December’s MLA Convention (go here and scroll down to “Listen to the 2008 Presidential Address”) identifies “coursecentrism” as a disabling but unnoticed disease in the humanities. In a coursecentric system, classrooms are discrete spaces, courses don’t “communicate” with one another, and faculty members operate as free agents in disregard of each other’s teaching. Worse, an undergraduate majoring in a coursecentric field leaves college having collected many credits and read lots of books, but the knowledge hasn’t accumulated into a learned formation.

Without more coordination among teachers and complementarity and reiteration among courses, students keep the things they learn in the course precisely within the course. As Graff observes, with a few studies to back him up, “students who learn a subject well enough to get a good grade in a course on it often prove helpless when they are asked to apply what they have learned to some context outside the course.” Why? Because the other courses they take don’t compare and contrast with the one course in any meaningful way. No synthesis happens among teachers, and the students take the cue. Graff quotes Jim Salvucci: “What you learn in a course tends to stay in the course.” This helps explain, Graff says, why we have such high levels of apathy and disengagement

among college students (as measured by projects such as the National Survey of Student Engagement).

It's a stern analysis, and it runs against much of the triumphalism that has surrounded advents in the humanities for the last four decades. The arrival of deconstruction, feminism, cultural studies, "opening up the canon," postcolonialism, interdisciplinarity, and the rest has been cast by most humanities professors as progress (and, of course, by traditionalist professors and off-campus conservatives as a curse). Graff agrees, except when it comes to the way in which these advances have affected the shape of the curriculum. In short, he judges, they have only aggravated coursecentrism and the bureaucracy that underlies it, in spite of their pretense of radicalism.

"To make a long story short," Graff asserts, "we became terrific at adding exciting new theories, fields, texts, cultures, and courses to the existing mix, but we've been challenged, to say the least, when it comes to connecting what we've added to what was already there and to itself." Scholars and critics and theorists may have marveled at all the pluralism and debate (was any word so fetishized back in the 1980s as "difference" was?), but they didn't recognize that the differences and aporias and gaps and fissures and binaries and dismantlings they wrote about so approvingly in the quarterlies might have damaging effects in the curriculum.

Indeed, interdisciplinarity may have claimed a bridge-building aim, but in truth the opposite happened. "Interdisciplinary programs have helped make important connections," Graff says, "but ultimately they have reproduced fragmentation rather than overcome it, since interdisciplinary programs tend to be disconnected from each other as well as from the disciplines."

We should take coursecentric effect seriously. It should be added to discussions of theory, multiculturalism, cultural studies, and interdisciplinarity, and to histories of the recent humanities. Maybe the reason professors haven't done so is that as schools of thought developed, as masters collected disciples, as theories fought one another in the quarterlies, as jobs with new specialties and expertises were offered, scholars became too caught up in what they see and think, and forgot an essential element in the field. That is: how it all looks to the undergraduate student.

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